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ABSTRACT

Problems involving empirical research into written business communication in Finnish and English are examined. Some of the problems are shown to be obvious reasons for the scarcity of research in this field. Three issues are discussed: (1) problems in establishing sub-categories and classification of current written business communication; (2) the role that some of the categories in the established pattern have in cross-cultural communication regarding changes taking place in international communication systems, and problems in the treatment of cross-cultural issues in international business writing (with the Finnish language as one element); and (3) the accessibility and diversity of real-life material. The problem of research into written business communication is treated as a struggle against time and technical development because time and technology affect real-life business communication practices. It is concluded that the linguistic outcome of a piece of communication in business is greatly determined by the mode of communication (e.g., telex, fax machine), and that the rapid emergence of new media for communication affects the researcher's ability to investigate the properties of one before another enters the market. Contains 19 references. (LB)

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RUNNING AGAINST TIME AND TECHNOLOGY: PROBLEMS IN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH INTO WRITTEN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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Introduction

Written business communication has traditionally not received the scholarly interest that other fields of professional writing have. The language of science and engineering for instance are better covered in this respect (see Robinson 1980; Moran and Journet 1985; Johns 1986). This paper will discuss some problems involving empirical research into written business communication in Finnish and English. Some of these problems are obvious reasons for the scarcity of research in this field.

The discussion in this paper will be based on the assumption that we are dealing with an extensive volume of data, and what follows applies to the compilation of real-life material for the purpose of a quantitative study on relative frequencies of chosen linguistic phenomena. This is close to the type of research that for instance Nigel Holden called for in a paper presented in the Barcelona Conference on Language Learning and Business Education (Holden 1989:43):

> ... we know surprisingly little about language usage and performance in business contexts and in relation to companies' competitive quest for resources and strategic advantage. ... There is a need all in all for empirical investigations which attempt to study language in the business world for what it is. These studies are not only necessary in order to enhance our understanding of language as a facet of corporate communication. There is another reason: how people use language in business contexts represents one of the most potential social influences on modern life. It is curious that this matter has been neglected for so long.

At this point an acknowledgement must be made, however, of some recent manifestations of cross-cultural interests in research into business English. By

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the 80's only some haphazard attempts were made at dealing with cross-cultural issues in research into business communication (see Gieselman 1980:8), and what few studies there were tended to be related to behavioral rather than linguistic issues (eg. Haneda and Shima 1981). The continuing deficit in the US trade with Japan, however, has prompted the American authorities to find reasons also in their business people's cultural behaviour, and the recent developments in Europe are causing additional anxiety among the American business professionals. The theme of the 1988 International Convention of the Association for Business Communication, for instance, was 'Global Implications for Business Communications' (see Bruno 1988) with many worthwhile contributions, but a mention will only be made of Ulla Connor's (1988) contrastive paper on persuasive business correspondence between an American and a Japanese firm. As the title implies, this paper was also based on a particular case, and there are more of those focusing on one cross-cultural aspect or another. Another indication of the current interest in cross-cultural matters in the United States materialized in a conference that took place in April 1990 at Eastern Michigan University with the theme 'Languages and Communication for World Business and the Professions'.

There is an awareness in Europe, as well, of the demands that the Single European Market scheduled to become effective in 1992, and, more currently, the potential European Economic Area comprising also some eastern European countries, will place on international communication competence (Verrept 1989). The Conference on Business Learning and Business Education held in Barcelona (see Silcock 1989), and another in Antwerp, are indications of a fresh European interest in advancing and promoting education in business language and business language teaching, prompted by this worldwide awareness of the importance of intercultural factors in real-life communication.

This paper will focus on three issues. Firstly, after dealing with the terminological diversity in labelling written business communication today, it will introduce the problems in establishing sub-categories within this language variety and present a pattern for the classification of current written business communication. Secondly, it will deal with the role that some of the categories in the established pattern have in cross-cultural communication with reference to the changes taking place in international communication systems. It will also enunciate some problems in the treatment of cross-cultural issues in

international business writing with the Finnish language as one element. Finally, the discussion will cover the accessibility and diversity of real-life material. The problem of research into written business communication will be treated as a struggle against time and technical development from the viewpoint of the impact that these two factors have on real-life business communication practices.

The present discussion will thus be focused on the considerations preceding the linguistic analysis, as the decisions taken at the stage of establishing the scope of the study will decisively mold the final outcome of the analysis of the material. The central concerns in compiling the real-life material are crystallized in these questions: *what*, *where* and *when*? The answers are influenced by factors which can be called the three T's: *terminology*, *technology* and *time*. Additionally, the *cultural environment* affects, perhaps surprisingly, the very compilation stage, although from another angle. The network of problems is presented in Figure 1.

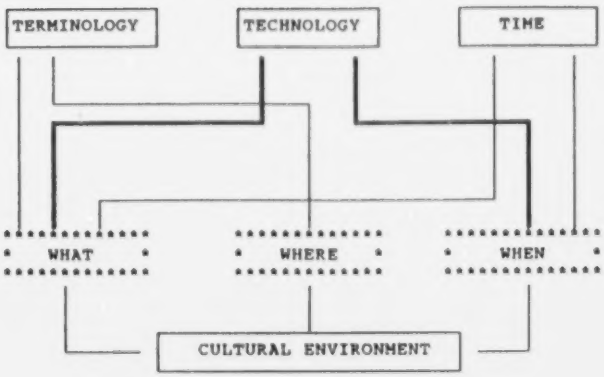

Figure 1. Basic concerns in compiling material for empirical research into written business communication.

The question of *what* refers to the composition of material, *where* to the source of material, and *when* both to the dates of individual data and the period of time that the study covers. These factors, although separate in themselves, have an intricate and overlapping influence, as shown in Figure 1. The following discussion will be related to the considerations introduced in this figure and references will be made to it from time to time.

The scope of business communication

Let us start the discussion by looking at terminology and establishing what may be meant by the term *business* in the phrase 'business communication'. The word 'business' is now quite current in Europe as well as in the United States, where it has always been more widely used. This term seems to be superseding the more economically oriented and slightly pompous-sounding term *commerce*, although in her bibliography on ESP from 1980 Robinson talks about articles and textbooks on the language of commerce and not of business at all. Thus the change has been rather rapid in favour of 'business'. But what does this term include? This question has interested American scholars for more than half a century, and one of the needs to define this concept is the administrative system of their colleges and universities, where faculties and departments may have to compete for the same courses, students and funds (Gieselman 1989:20-35). In a recent collection of articles entitled *Writing in the business professions* (Kogen 1989), business is defined broadly to embody "any working situation, whether corporate governmental professional or industrial" (Kogen 1989:xiv). The concept of business communication covers at least the following areas:

- corporate communication
- organizational communication
- managerial communication
- administrative or governmental communication
- technical communication

The first three concepts refer to the communication performed daily in ordinary profit-making companies (Flatley 1982; Kilpatrick 1984) or private sector organizations. In line with Moran and Journet (1985) and Moran and Moran (1985), who deal with business writing as being included in technical communications, we can regard business communication as one section of technical

communication, which might also be described as industrial communication and as including for instance engineering, forestry, computer sciences, and electronics (Trimble 1985:6).

Establishing the content to the term business is then one of the preliminaries in designing the composition of the material. The scholar will have to decide whether examples of communication from such organizations as the Red Cross or Unicef will qualify. He will further have to decide whether items of communication with insurance companies or law firms can be included. A decision will also have to be made as to whether governmental communication involving for instance public purchases and other transactions by cities and schools should qualify for business communication. These considerations relate to the basic concerns of terminology in deciding where to attempt to obtain material from.

We will next deal with the second part of the concept 'business communication' and produce a presentation which will be related to the problems of time and technology. Figure 2 shows one way of summarizing business communication.

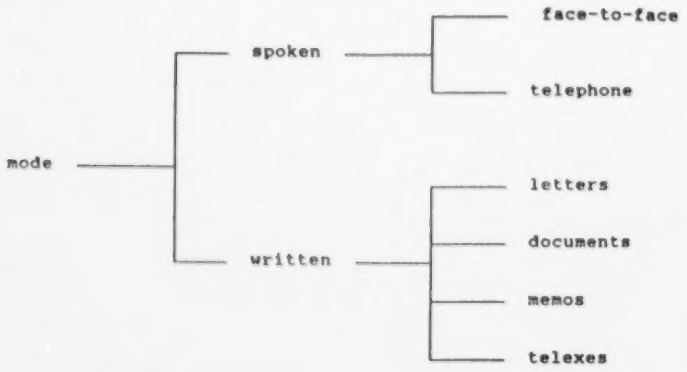

Figure 2. Summary of communication within a business context (L'Estrange (1982) as quoted in Zak and Dudley-Evans 1986:59).

Communication is divided in this network into the spoken and written modes of language. The delicacy of the network illustrating the spoken mode can be increased by splitting face-to-face communication into service encounters and negotiations. This network, which dates from 1982 and was quoted as late as in 1986, does not, however, fully illustrate the present-day-situation any more. The current real-life situation is resembled more closely in Figure 3. This figure is restricted to the written mode of language, thereby reflecting the focus of interest in this paper from now on, which will be on solely written business communication.

This figure shows the basic methods of communication from a slightly different angle than Figure 2. Figure 3 focuses on solely interactional business writing and thus documents, for instance, are excluded from it. Brochures and annual reports are likewise considered non-interactive business writing and therefore outside the scope of this classification. The 'entry condition', to use a term introduced by systemic linguists, of the classification is the method of transmission, and Figure 3 shows the strong impact of the electronic media in the transmission of messages in the business environment. Many businesses are conducting a considerable part of their day-to-day internal and external communication via the display terminal. In this figure this is called computer-to-computer communication, but the concepts terminal-to-terminal communication, electronic mail or shortly 'email' are all current in professional jargon. The use of the telefax or fax machine in business communication has mushroomed at the expense of the telex. These considerations in terms of what the impact of technology is on the outcome of the piece of communication relate to the concept of time.

Figure 3 displays another phenomenon brought about by technology in the form of the electronic devices in the transmission of written pieces of communication, and this phenomenon is of crucial importance in deciding what the material should include: it is no longer possible to determine the genre of the item of communication in terms of the method of transmission. In other words while it was, and still is, possible to know in advance what one would receive from the firm if one asked for telex messages, for instance, one would be likely to receive hand-scribbled messages of many kinds in response to a request for letters, in addition to the traditional neat, type-written and carefully worded items of communication. This leads to the necessity of a new definition of a business

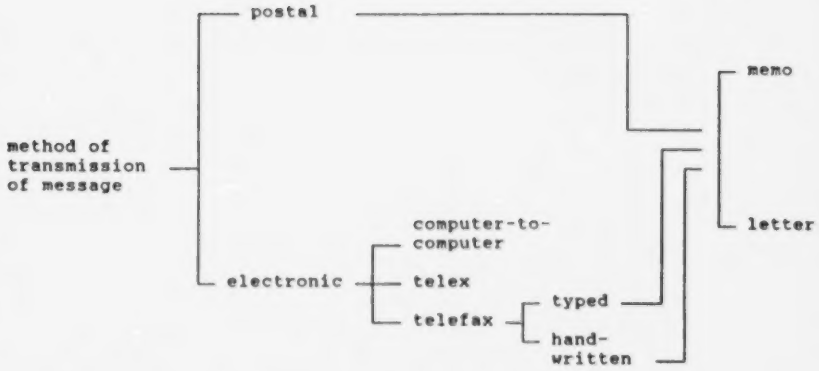

Figure 3. Classification of interactional business writing.

letter, and what follows is an attempt to deal with this dilemma brought about by technology in labelling written business communication.

The business letter

It has been established that *letter* in business environment is no longer restricted to the method of transmission. It is therefore necessary to look for criteria based on the physical appearance of the item of communication, the 'topic framework' or 'staging', as it were (cf. Brown and Yule 1983:150). Firstly, a business letter (henceforth BL) must have a date. This requirement excludes for instance circulars otherwise composed in a letter form. The recipient must further be identified not only in the inside address but with a salutation as well. The sender of the letter must also be specified in the form of a signature. This definition places memoranda or memos into a distinct group from letters, as

memos are not addressed to anyone in particular and frequently no person is identified as the sender of the message, and a memorandum may just carry the following information in way of recipient and sender:

attention: all UK dealers
from: public relations

In a cross-cultural study a letter in Finnish must be allowed to deviate from the requirement of a salutation as this is not a conventional element in business correspondence in Finnish (see below).

The terms 'sender' or 'writer' involve some further conceptual problems, as the sender of a letter may refer to the company or to the signing person, while the real composer of the message, the encoder, may have been the secretary or a junior employee. Therefore it is necessary to specify that in a linguistic context the 'sender' or 'writer' of the letter means the encoder of the linguistic message. Correspondingly the terms 'recipient' or 'reader' refer to the intended decoder or the message.

The widespread adoption of the telefax machine by businesses has enlivened a long-forgotten item: a hand-written message containing the characteristics of a letter listed above. While these messages occasionally qualify for letters when the above criteria are applied, they should not be investigated in the same group with type-written letters. The hand-written, or hand-scribbled messages, are better defined as notes rather than letters in spite of the other characteristics of a letter. These are a step between the telephone and the computer. This means that the speech situation in encoding a message by hand is highly time-conscious, and conventional communicative requirements in terms of politeness and tactics are discarded with the simple choice of the pen instead of the keyboard. The hand-written letter will have to be studied with even closer reference to the spoken language than the type-written one. Correspondingly, a type-written, addressed and signed piece of communication can be seen to indicate that the outcome of the communicative intention is not instantaneous but a product of at least some contemplation.

Cross-cultural considerations

Classification of business letters

One cross-cultural implication in the investigation of BLs is the problem of salutation in the process of distinguishing letters from for example memoranda and notes. Finnish business letters, ie. letters written in Finnish, whose format and layout are rigidly standardized, generally contain no salutation to the addressee; only some recent sales letters or unsolicited offers deviate from this with salutations like *Hei!* (Hello) or *Arvoisa Vastaanottaja* (Dear Receiver). This type of letter is, however, outside the transactional classification provided below, and thus outside the interest of this paper.

Let us now look at the typology of letters and introduce some problems connected with the impact of the cultural environment to the questions of what and when. Traditionally textbooks have classified business letters by type, as shown in the following intuitive summary of textbook classifications from the past two decades:

1. inquiry/request for a quotation
2. quotation/offer/refusal to quote
3. order
4. confirmation/acknowledgement of order
5. packing/shipping instruction
6. payment/invoicing/accounting
7. reminder/collection
8. complaint/claim
9. adjustment
10. agency
11. sales letter

Another solidly established approach is the rhetorical one, while a recent one is the functional approach (Gieselman 1980:13). It does not differ fundamentally from the above typology as yet, but uses the communicative approach with terminology referring to the discourse function of the message, eg. 'refusing to quote' or 'giving negative information'. In real life business communication situations do not conform to the mold of the textbook classifications, but there the typology is considerably more diverse and the boundaries of categories less distinct. This has been empirically established by Flatley (1982), who, in trying to establish the type of communication that some managers were involved in,

started out with a textbook classification, but had subjects adding several categories in the list during the questioning stage. Legal correspondence, proposals and customer relations were among the groups that the business professionals most frequently added in the list. Establishing a set of categories that would convey the real life truth and yet be manageable and unambiguous is therefore a major task for the scholar.

Accessibility and availability of material

I will next deal with the cross-cultural problems that the scholar working with Finnish material is bound to face, and focus the discussion on the accessibility and availability of material. As these concepts are related, they will be covered simultaneously. This discussion relates to the questions of *what?* and *when?* in Figure 1.

It is difficult to obtain Finnish material to cover all sub-groups in the above set of categories. One reason for this is that some transactional situations are not dealt with in writing at all in the Finnish domestic trade. Item 5, for instance, which is a copious group in international communication, including packing and shipping instructions, is hardly represented at all in Finnish interactional writing, as the paperwork included involves basically filling in forms, while the rest of the exchange of information takes place over the telephone, by telex, or with memos via the telefax. Similarly, sub-categories covering banking and agency arrangements represent activities typical of foreign trade, and interactive written communication within these categories is not available in Finnish.

Another problem with availability involves the question of time. In Finland the law requires enterprises to store their files for only five years, and even this obligation is limited to the material pertaining to financial matters, mostly matters having a bearing on taxation. This has two consequences from the researcher's point of view. First, the correspondence that is stored and thus potentially available frequently contains highly confidential information, and firms are understandably not willing to have their trade secrets displayed on linguistic forums and printed in publications, although the letters would be used just to exemplify a linguistic topic. One solution to this is the familiar method of erasing the critical details, numbers, percentages, names of products

and the like, but who would do it? The office personnel tends to be overworked already and cannot be expected to do this 'editorial' work on large quantities of samples. The researchers would naturally be prepared to do this themselves, but again this requires confidence from the firm's part and also the time from someone within the firm to deal with the practical arrangements involved. These problems multiply in relation to the volume of material pursued.

The above considerations apply to the accessibility of classified material. Next, the discussion will be focused on neutral correspondence. Business enterprises, in Finland at least, tend to destroy the correspondence that they are not obliged to store. As letters are an infrequent mode of communication in themselves, the scholar will have to be prepared for a long wait even if he or she succeeds in arranging for someone to store the future correspondence. This situation may also affect the outcome of the correspondence if the writers know that their creations are going to be scrutinized. Another problem is connected with the contents of the letters. Businesses are generally not willing to release their replies to the complaints they have received, for example, or the complaints they have made, as by accommodating the first request they would be placing their business image at stake, and providing the latter might violate certain unwritten rules of business ethics. In these cases the executives will have to be convinced that the material provided will be handled with discretion. This consideration is not restricted to Finnish firms alone, but the small size of the business community in this country requires a greater awareness of these factors than large regions such as the United Kingdom or the United States.

For all these reasons finding the real-life, but specifically Finnish, material to form a representative, well-formed, balanced corpus is hard work, and persuading the business people into co-operation may require persistence. It must be pointed out, however, that the above problems are more letter-specific than business communication-specific. Telexes, for instance, are easier to obtain, as until quite recently they have been the most abundant type of unpublished written business communication (cf. Zak and Dudley-Evans 1986:59). One might also think that the business professionals' relative willingness to release telex material compared to letters is an indication of their greater respect towards the genre of the letter.

Conclusion

It has been suggested in this paper that the linguistic outcome of a piece of communication in business is greatly, although not totally, determined by the mode of communication, and strongly related to the date of the transmission of the message. The telex as a mode is losing ground and the fax machine or the telefax is bringing new polar considerations into communication: at one extreme it strengthens and brings back, by virtue of its capacity to enable the instantaneous transmission of data, the genre of the letter that was disappearing under the realm of the telex, and at the other extreme it is introducing a new mode of business communication, that of a hand-written, instantly transferred piece of communication having the characteristics of a letter. This raises some new questions, eg. will cross-cultural business education have to provide a course in the graphology of the culture involved, or will communication fail because of the encoder's bad handwriting or decoder's poor ability to decipher it?

With the rapid emergence of new media for communication the researcher has little time to investigate the properties of one mode before another device enters the market and sets its mark on the linguistic outcome of the piece of communication. Can linguists keep up with this language change brought about by the rapid development of communication media in the international business communication? One's pessimism is mitigated by the increasing awareness and interest in this area of LSP, as indicated at the beginning of this paper. More importantly, the cultural findings in communication analysis have a long-lasting value, and these findings are not dependent on the mode of transmission of the message. Therefore, research into cross-cultural issues in business communication has a large order in the present and future written business communication.

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